

House Members Call on Sec. Paige to Apologize or Resign

Wednesday, 09 April 2003

Washington - Twelve Members of Congress are releasing a letter to Secretary of Education Roderick Paige today, expressing disappointment in his recent comments expressing a belief that public schools, with their student bodies of various beliefs, are inferior to schools that teach expressly Christian values. The letter will be sent to Secretary Paige tomorrow.

"We were stunned and saddened to read your comments... We should not have to remind you that our nation is composed of people of different faiths, and that our Bill of Rights elevates the protection of religious liberty as our First Freedom. This is no mere coincidence; the framers of our Bill of Rights understood that a free society must, in the first instance, protect the freedom of individual conscience," the letter reads.

The letter continues that the Members are looking for assurance that the Secretary's statement does not accurately reflect his beliefs. In addition, the Members ask that the Secretary offer a "sincere and unambiguous apology."

"If you are unprepared to make clear that this sort of religious bigotry has no place in the Department of Education, then we would urge you to resign and allow a person who understands this nation's commitment to diversity and religious equality to assume your duties," the letter continues.

Yesterday, in the Washington Post, Paige was quoted as saying, "[a]ll things equal, I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith," and that "The reason that Christian schools and Christian universities are growing is a result of a strong value system. In a religious environment the value system is set. That's not the case in a public school where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values."

Secretary Paige, at a press conference yesterday, refused to apologize for the comments.

The letter, which was distributed by Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), was co-signed by Reps. Conyers, Waxman, Frank, Engel, Levin, Serrano, Honda, Baldwin, Ackerman, Strickland, and Hoeffel.

LETTER ATTACHED

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Hon. Roderick R. Paige

Secretary of Education

U.S. Department of Education

400 Maryland Avenue, SW

Washington, DC 20202

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We were stunned and saddened to read your comments, as reported in today's Washington Post that, "[a]ll things equal, I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith," and that "[t]he reason that Christian schools and Christian universities are growing is a result of a strong value system. In a religious environment the value system is set. That's not the case in a public school where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values."

While every American has the right to decide whether to seek a religious or secular education for their children, it is profoundly troubling when the nation's top educational official suggests that a "public school where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values," offers an inferior education to those infused with "the values of the Christian community."

We should not have to remind you that our nation is composed of people of different faiths, and that our Bill of Rights elevates the protection of religious liberty as our First Freedom. This is no mere coincidence; the framers of our Bill of Rights understood that a free society must, in the first instance, protect the freedom of individual conscience.

No one is suggesting that parents should not have the right to send their children to a religious school of their own choosing. What is troubling is that the government's top education official would appear to prefer educational institutions that are reserved to one denomination, and who views the presence of children with different religious beliefs as detrimental to a sound education. Our schools, and the Department of Education, must serve all children and respect the faiths of those children's families. It is shocking that you seem not to understand this simple fact.

We are hoping that you can provide some assurance to the American people that these statements, which have been confirmed by your press secretary, do not accurately reflect your beliefs. A clarification of those views would be welcome. Additionally, we believe that you owe a sincere and unambiguous apology to the many American families whose faiths and educational choices your remarks have denigrated. If you are unprepared to make clear that this sort of religious bigotry has no place in the Department of Education, then we would urge you to resign and allow a person who understands this nation's commitment to diversity and religious equality to assume your duties.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

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